

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: A Life in Anarchy

Briefing Document: Analysis of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's Key Ideas

Introduction

This document summarizes the core themes and arguments presented in the provided excerpts from Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's writings, primarily focusing on his critiques of property, government, and traditional economic structures, while also addressing his complex views on God, labor, and society. The sources include excerpts from his Wikipedia page, "System of Economical Contradictions; Or, The Philosophy of Misery," and "What is Property?".

I. Core Themes and Ideas

Critique of Property as Theft:

Central Argument: Proudhon's most famous assertion, "property is theft," is a central tenet of his thought. He does not condemn all forms of possession but rather *private* property that allows for the exploitation of labor and the extraction of unearned income. He distinguishes between "possession" (actual use and occupancy) and "property" (absolute control with the right to increase and exclude others).

Quote: "I call PROPERTY the sum these abuses exclusively. To each of us property seems a polygon whose angles need knocking off; but, the operation performed, M. Blanqui maintains that the figure will still be a polygon (an hypothesis admitted in mathematics, although not proven), while I consider that this figure will be a circle."

Analysis: This quote indicates Proudhon's view that what is commonly considered property is not a legitimate entity but a collection of abuses. He believes that eliminating these abuses will transform the concept of property entirely.

Right of Increase and Exploitation: He argues that property is based on the "right of increase," which allows owners to accrue wealth without labor. This mechanism leads to the exploitation of the working class, creating a system of inherent inequality. Proudhon sees interest, rent, and profit as forms of theft.

Quote: "PROPERTY IS THE RIGHT OF INCREASE; that is, the power to produce without labor. Now, to produce without labor is to make something from nothing; in short, to create."

Land as an Implement: Proudhon challenges the justification of property based on land ownership. He argues that while land is an "implement" used in production, it does not inherently belong to any individual, as no one created it, it is simply a natural resource. He views ownership based on having an advantage as "the right of might".

Quote: "I admit that the land is an implement; but who made it? Did the proprietor? Did he—by the efficacious virtue of the right of property, by this MORAL QUALITY infused into the soil—endow it with vigor and fertility? Exactly there lies the monopoly of the proprietor; in the fact that, though he did not make the implement, he asks pay for its use."

Opposition to Government and Authority:

Anarchism: Proudhon is considered one of the fathers of anarchism. His writings demonstrate a profound distrust of centralized power, whether in the form of the state or traditional authority. He sees government as inherently oppressive, acting to control, exploit, and subjugate individuals.

Quote: "To be GOVERNED is to be watched, inspected, spied upon, directed, law-driven, numbered, regulated, enrolled, indoctrinated, preached at, controlled, checked, estimated, valued, censured, commanded, by creatures who have neither the right nor the wisdom nor the virtue to do so."

Rejection of State Control: He believes that true freedom can only be achieved through the abolition of the state, not through its reformation. He critiques systems that use state power, stating in response to democrats "If you know the use that you should make of power, and if you know how power should be organized, you possess economic science" and that possessing this means the state is unnecessary.

Critique of Monopoly: He sees monopolies, whether of land, industry or even patented technologies as tools of oppression, as it gives the power over another to a single entity. He believes these to be a source of value becoming "vague, arbitrary, egoistic, and essentially variable thing". He also claims that monopolies disguise "political economy under the influence of monopoly" to cover up the abuses, like prostitution being classified as a form of capital.

Quote: "Where, then, does monopoly get this singular virtue, which the etymology of the word and the vulgar aspect of the thing would never lead us to suspect? Monopoly is at bottom simply the autocracy of man over himself."

Mutualism and Free Association:

Alternative Vision: In contrast to the hierarchical structures of both capitalism and communism, Proudhon envisions a society based on "free association." This concept calls for the voluntary organization of individuals into groups to meet their common needs, emphasizing mutual cooperation rather than competition.

Quote: "Monopoly owes its existence both to nature and to man: it has its source at once in the profoundest depths of our conscience and in the external fact of our individualization... the social problem is to find out, not how to abolish, but how to reconcile, all monopolies."

Mutualism: A key aspect of this is "mutualism," which advocates for economic exchange based on fair value and reciprocity. He proposes that labor should be compensated in kind or through "labor vouchers," preventing the accumulation of private wealth and the exploitation of workers. He believes that such an exchange would ensure equal compensation.

Complex Relationship with God:

God as a Hypothesis: Proudhon approaches the concept of God with a mix of skepticism and acceptance. He does not dogmatically believe in a traditional God, but he recognizes the psychological necessity of the idea. He sees God as a human construct—an attempt to explain the origin of inspiration and moral purpose.

Quote: "The hypothesis of God is allowable, for it forces itself upon every man in spite of himself... as for him who is in doubt, he needs but to reflect a moment to understand that his doubt necessarily supposes an unknown something, which, sooner or later, he will call God."

God as a Source of Authority and Oppression: He also critiques how the concept of God is used to justify authority, exploitation, and oppression by the state and the church. He suggests that it is a tool used to control the population.

Quote: "It is from God, man says to himself, that authority and power come to me: then, let us obey God and the prince. Obedite Deo et principibus."

"Accusation" of God: He questions why God would create a world with so much suffering, injustice and innate egoism, and even goes so far as to claim that the Christian God is the root cause of societal issues.

Quote: "The sins which we ask you to forgive, you caused us to commit; the traps from which we implore you to deliver us, you set for us; and the Satan who besets us is yourself."

Labor as the Basis of Value:

Emphasis on Labor: Proudhon considers labor as the fundamental source of value. He opposes the accumulation of capital and unearned wealth, believing that those who work should receive the full value of their labor. This is a primary reason for his criticisms of property.

Possession as Use: He believes that things that someone uses, particularly as labor, is possessed by them, while property that exploits others should not exist.

II. Controversial Positions

The Wikipedia excerpt notes that Proudhon held controversial views that have been categorized as proto-fascist, anti-Semitic, and anti-feminist. While these themes are not explored within the supplied excerpts, it is important to acknowledge that his work has been subject to historical controversy.

III. Key Arguments and Logical Structure

Use of Contradictions and Dialectics: Proudhon utilizes dialectical thinking (inspired by Hegel) to expose the inherent contradictions within existing systems. He identifies the tension between ideals and realities, using this approach to challenge established beliefs.

Critique of Economic Theories: He critiques classical economists like Adam Smith and J.B. Say, exposing flaws in their theories and showing how these ideas support the status quo of exploitation. He argues that they cannot be taken as the truth, and should always be looked at with criticism.

Logical Deconstruction: He meticulously deconstructs prevailing ideas about property, often pointing out logical fallacies and contradictions in their justifications. He uses examples, such as the use of the word mine to demonstrate its true meaning of possession rather than control.

Moral Argumentation: Proudhon's critique is not purely economic or political; it has a strong moral dimension. He argues that systems of property and government violate fundamental principles of justice and equality.

IV. Conclusion

Proudhon's writings offer a radical critique of 19th-century society. He challenges the foundations of private property, the state, and traditional notions of authority. His vision of a society based on free association, mutualism, and justice has had a lasting impact on anarchist and socialist thought. However, it is also crucial to acknowledge the controversial aspects of his work, especially those relating to race, gender, and religion. Studying his work today encourages a critical understanding of power, exploitation, and the ongoing search for more just social and economic structures. He encourages readers to look at issues with fresh eyes and to critically examine assumptions.

Timeline of Main Events

Early Life and Education (Proudhon): The texts don't give us a detailed timeframe for this but broadly covers Proudhon's intellectual development and education before he enters the printing trade. He seems to have had some sort of formal education but also was largely self taught.

Entrance into the Printing Trade (Proudhon): Proudhon entered the printing trade. This is where he met the "poor printer" he exchanges letters with, Blanqui. It is also where his focus shifts to philosophy and writing.

Decision to Pursue Philosophy and Writing (Proudhon): A pivotal moment in Proudhon's life. He moves away from practical labor and focuses on intellectual pursuits.

Early Writings (Proudhon): This involves his early philosophical explorations on property and its nature.

1840: Publication of *What is Property?*: This groundbreaking work establishes Proudhon's reputation and lays out his core argument that property is theft. It includes his famous definition: "property is the sum these abuses exclusively." It is also where he defines himself as an "anarchist."

1841: *Second Memoir: A Letter to M. Blanqui (in What is Property?)*: In this letter, Proudhon writes to Blanqui, clarifying his position and critiquing contemporary economic practices, particularly the expansion of mortgages.

Publication of *System of Economical Contradictions; Or, The Philosophy of Misery (Date Unknown)*: Proudhon continues his exploration of economic issues, and begins to analyze economic contradictions, using concepts like "monopoly" and "value." He also touches on a theory of God as a primordial intuition in humanity.

Later Life and Death (Proudhon): Not detailed in the sources, but the "Wikipedia" excerpt mentions this general phase.

Cast of Characters

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: (1809-1865) The central figure of these texts. A French philosopher, economist, and sociologist. He is a radical thinker known for his critiques of property, capitalism, and the state. He is an early proponent of anarchist thought and mutualism. He was a printer by trade.

Key Ideas: "Property is theft," critique of government as oppressive and controlling, emphasis on mutualism and free association, rejection of both capitalism and communism. He was a complex figure who also held some controversial views, such as proto-fascist sentiments, anti-semitism, and anti-feminism, though these aren't covered in these texts.

Blanqui (Auguste Blanqui): A fellow revolutionary and acquaintance of Proudhon. He is the recipient of the letter that serves as the *Second Memoir of What is Property?* Blanqui is portrayed as a radical thinker who is also concerned about the abuses of property. The text notes that he acknowledged that property is abused in many ways but still believes in it at a foundational level.

Adam Smith: Scottish economist and philosopher. He is referenced by Proudhon as the source of some ideas about value and political economy. Proudhon notes that Smith's ideas were intuitive, not derived from fact.

J.B. Say: A French economist, a follower of Adam Smith. Proudhon cites Say as an interpreter of Smith. Say is portrayed as someone who struggles to define value but ultimately falls under the sway of Smith's

basic principles. Proudhon also argues that Say's views on things like prostitution are indicative of the influence of monopoly in society.

King of Naples: Briefly mentioned in relation to a sulfur monopoly. The interaction with England is used by Proudhon as an example of economic struggles in the world and the use of "casus belli" by governments.

M. Renouard: Mentioned in relation to industrial privileges and patents. Proudhon quotes Renouard as saying "Privileges are a corrective of regulation," which Proudhon disputes, stating that "Regulation was a corrective of privilege" which is the logically prior condition.

Bareme: Named in reference to a specific individual who was granted a patent. His example is part of Proudhon's argument about what kinds of knowledge can be patented versus what should be in the public domain.

Pascal: French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher. Proudhon uses Pascal as an example of an idea that would not have been patentable by the logic of patent law.

Archimedes: Greek mathematician, physicist, engineer, inventor, and astronomer. Proudhon mentions Archimedes as a hypothetical example of someone who wouldn't be able to use his own inventions without a license if he were alive today.

M. Arago: French astronomer and politician. Quoted on the nature of invention. He is cited as supporting the idea that Archimedes could be forced to purchase his own invention.

M. Rossi: Mentioned in reference to the idea of political economy needing to submit to a "new corrective" when it comes to morality, according to the "monopoly" concept.

M. Renouard: Another person quoted about patents in the industrial world.

Roman Emperors: Referenced by Proudhon in reference to laws concerning the persecution of Christians and to show how they can sometimes be counterproductive.

M. Considerant: Criticized by Proudhon in the *Second Memoir of What is Property* for his use of the syllogism. Proudhon argues that the syllogism is false by its nature, thus making his logic suspect.

Reid: A writer who is quoted about the origin of property rights. Proudhon uses Reid's view that the earth is given to men in common to support his argument.

Toullier: Writer on jurisprudence, quoted several times in relation to ideas on property. Proudhon cites Toullier to attack his belief that property is a "moral quality."

Pothier: Legal scholar cited to discuss the divine right of property. Proudhon uses him to argue that the law has sanctioned the excesses of self-interest.

Grotius: Legal scholar whose words are analyzed by Proudhon. Grotius is quoted to discuss an "unchristian" view of the poor.

Say: Quoted on land and how it works as an "implement" of production and how landlords increase the utility of the products of their tenants.

Buchanan: Quoted by Say in the text to claim that proprietors are not monopolists.

Locke: Quoted in relation to the idea that man cannot render matter intelligent. Proudhon contrasts this with Toullier's view that the proprietor renders land "moral."

Papinius: Quoted in reference to usury. Proudhon argues usury eats up capital in the same way usury eats up wealth.

Ricardo and MacCulloch and Mill: economists mentioned as the sources for theories on land rent.

Diogenes: Quoted as an example of the logic of individual possession. The "cynic" is used as an example of somebody with a kind of absolute ownership over something.

Aristotle: Named in relation to logic and syllogisms. Proudhon claims the syllogism is flawed and that in the arguments for property rights, the conclusion includes more than the premise.

St. Paul: Quoted to show that "a violation of right goes for nothing" when it comes to prescription.

Key Themes and Ideas:

Critique of Property: The core of Proudhon's arguments, property is seen as inherently exploitative and unjust. It is a source of inequality, and not a natural right.

Critique of the State: Government is viewed as an instrument of oppression, used to enforce and protect property rights.

Mutualism: A key concept for Proudhon. It calls for a society based on free exchange and cooperation without exploitation.

Anarchism: Proudhon identifies himself as an anarchist. This is a rejection of top-down authority.

Economic Contradictions: Proudhon highlights inherent conflicts within economic systems, such as the tension between labor and capital.

Labor Theory of Value: Proudhon believes labor should be the basis of value and criticizes the system where the capitalist or the landlord gets the largest share, even without doing any work.

Justice: He seeks a more just social and economic order, where all people have equal rights and opportunities.

Frequently Asked Questions on Proudhon's Ideas

What is Proudhon's view of government, and why does he oppose it?

Proudhon fundamentally opposes government, viewing it as an entity that controls, regulates, and exploits individuals. He argues that to be governed is to be subjected to constant surveillance, direction, and manipulation by those who lack the right, wisdom, or virtue to do so. He sees government as a force that ultimately leads to the repression, exploitation, and even violence against its citizens under the guise of public utility. Ultimately Proudhon believes government exists to take from the working person while giving to those who have power.

What is "mutualism," and how does it fit into Proudhon's philosophy?

Mutualism, in Proudhon's thought, is a system of social organization based on reciprocity and free association. It emphasizes voluntary cooperation and exchange among individuals and groups rather than hierarchical control. Mutualism rejects both capitalism, with its exploitation of labor and private property, and communism, with its centralized control of resources. It advocates for a society where people freely interact and create value together and then share in the fruits of their collective labor.

How does Proudhon view the concept of God?

Proudhon's view of God is complex and unconventional. He acknowledges that the idea of God is an intuitive, almost instinctive concept that humans seem to grasp. He entertains the hypothesis of God as a basis for exploration of his ideas, however he explicitly denies belief in the traditional notion of God. He sees the belief in God being used to take away the individual's liberty and wealth. Proudhon argues that the very act of denying God necessitates an initial affirmation, showing that humanity is in some ways hardwired to seek out this being that might not exist. He also criticizes the traditional religious notion of God, accusing it of being the root of suffering, injustice, and the justification for authority. He feels the notion of God is a tool that has been used to suppress the freedom of the many for the benefit of the powerful few.

What does Proudhon mean by his famous assertion "property is theft"?

Proudhon's statement that "property is theft" is not a condemnation of all forms of possession, but rather a critique of the specific concept of **domanial** property as it exists under the capitalist system. He distinguishes between *possession* (control and use of resources based on labor) and *property* (the right to exclusive ownership, including the ability to generate profit without labor), with the latter being his target. Proudhon argues that property allows some to unjustly accumulate wealth through rent, interest, and other forms of unearned increase, thereby depriving others of the fruits of their labor and thus, stealing from the poor. He views private property as inherently exploitative and a root cause of social inequality.

How does Proudhon differentiate between "possession" and "property"?

Proudhon makes a clear distinction between possession and property. Possession, in his view, refers to the relationship between a worker and the resources they use in the process of production as well as their right to the product of their labor. This is a right rooted in use and occupancy. Property, on the other hand, signifies an exclusive and absolute right of control over a thing, which includes the right to generate unearned revenue (such as rent or interest) and the ability to exclude others, which is a right divorced from use. He considers property, in this sense, the right to abuse and profit from something you may not even use. Proudhon believes that possession is legitimate, as it relates to individual labor and use, while property is inherently unjust as it allows the appropriation of wealth created by others.

What does Proudhon say about the idea of patents and intellectual property?

Proudhon is highly critical of patents and intellectual property. He argues that these systems essentially create monopolies and stifle innovation by restricting the free flow of ideas. He believes that ideas should be a common possession, not privately owned and therefore used to make a profit. He notes that patents often grant rights not to the idea or invention itself, but to its implementation, leading to situations where someone like Archimedes could be forced to buy a patent to use his own invention. Proudhon sees this system as unjust and economically harmful, a means by which the powerful profit at the expense of the poor.

Why does Proudhon argue that "increase" (interest, rent) is illegitimate?

Proudhon sees "increase," whether in the form of interest on loans or rent on land, as a fundamental form of theft. He argues that interest and rent are unearned income that allows the proprietor to profit without contributing any labor to the production process. He contends that the right of increase permits capitalists and landowners to unjustly extract value from the labor of others, leading to a system where some enrich themselves while others are exploited. Proudhon sees this mechanism as an inherent injustice baked into the capitalist property system. He claims that increase is just another way that the rich are able to take from the poor. He calls the system of increase "logarithms" that benefit only the wealthy.

How does Proudhon view the role of labor in society?

Labor is central to Proudhon's vision of a just society. He sees it as the primary source of value and the basis of all legitimate possession. He believes that those who produce wealth through their labor should have the right to the full fruits of their efforts. Proudhon emphasizes the inherent dignity of labor and criticizes any system that allows the exploitation of labor, particularly through unearned profits or the appropriation of resources. He believes that a society organized around mutualism would ensure that each person contributes according to their abilities and receives according to their needs.

Proudhon Study Guide

Quiz

What is Proudhon's primary objection to the concept of government? Proudhon views government as a system of constant surveillance, control, and exploitation that deprives individuals of their autonomy, property, and liberty. He sees it as acting on behalf of "creatures who have neither the right nor the wisdom nor the virtue to do so."

Why does Proudhon consider the concept of God to be an acceptable hypothesis? Proudhon argues that the hypothesis of God is unavoidable because the idea is implicit in human psychology, arising from an intuitive awareness of a universal, inspiring force. He suggests that even those who deny God must first have entertained the concept in order to reject it.

According to Proudhon, what is the relationship between value and monopoly? Proudhon argues that under monopoly, value loses its social character and becomes arbitrary, vague, and egoistic. Monopoly redefines "product" to encompass things that are immoral. It twists the meaning of value to reflect a purely self-serving perspective.

What is the difference between "property" and "possession" according to Proudhon? Proudhon distinguishes "property" as the legal right to control, use, and abuse a thing, while "possession" is the factual holding or use of a thing without necessarily having the legal ownership. He sees property as a source of exploitation, while possession is a necessary condition for labor and production.

Why does Proudhon criticize the idea of 'first occupancy' as a basis for property rights? Proudhon criticizes "first occupancy" because it ignores the element of time. It does not address the needs and rights of those who arrive later in a system of complete, monopolized occupancy, nor does it account for the social nature of production.

How does Proudhon define usury, and why does he consider it a form of robbery? Proudhon defines usury as the practice of lending money at interest, which he sees as a form of robbery. He considers it exploitative,

because the lender gains wealth without producing anything. Instead, the lender profits from the labor and needs of others.

Why does Proudhon criticize the Roman god Terminus, the god of boundaries? Proudhon criticizes Terminus because his worship reinforces the idea of fixed property boundaries, which he sees as a religious sanction for individual property and the accumulation of wealth. He argues that this system inevitably leads to the ruin of the people.

What is Proudhon's understanding of the relationship between individual labor and collective wealth?

Proudhon argues that while labor is individual, the wealth produced by society is inherently collective.

Therefore, the means of production and the product should be distributed equitably based on labor rather than being subject to monopolistic private property claims.

What does Proudhon mean when he calls himself an "anarchist?" Proudhon's self-identification as an anarchist is a profession of faith against government and its exploitative systems. It means that he is against top-down systems of control. He seeks a state of order that does not rely on state or authoritarian structures, and he bases his idea of justice on economic principles.

How does Proudhon argue against the idea that the proprietor has a right to increase? Proudhon argues that increase, such as interest or rent, is not a natural outcome of production or labor but is a form of exploitation that is granted to the proprietor. He claims that the proprietor is claiming for labor he did not perform, and thus profits from the work of others without contributing value.

Answer Key

Proudhon views government as a system of constant surveillance, control, and exploitation that deprives individuals of their autonomy, property, and liberty. He sees it as acting on behalf of "creatures who have neither the right nor the wisdom nor the virtue to do so."

Proudhon argues that the hypothesis of God is unavoidable because the idea is implicit in human psychology, arising from an intuitive awareness of a universal, inspiring force. He suggests that even those who deny God must first have entertained the concept in order to reject it.

Proudhon argues that under monopoly, value loses its social character and becomes arbitrary, vague, and egoistic. Monopoly redefines "product" to encompass things that are immoral. It twists the meaning of value to reflect a purely self-serving perspective.

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Proudhon criticizes "first occupancy" because it ignores the element of time. It does not address the needs and rights of those who arrive later in a system of complete, monopolized occupancy, nor does it account for the social nature of production.

Proudhon defines usury as the practice of lending money at interest, which he sees as a form of robbery. He considers it exploitative, because the lender gains wealth without producing anything. Instead, the lender profits from the labor and needs of others.

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Essay Questions

Analyze Proudhon's critique of property as a form of theft. How does he distinguish between 'property' and 'possession,' and why is this distinction crucial to his argument?

Discuss Proudhon's views on labor and its relation to value and ownership. How does he propose to reorganize economic relationships to reflect these views, and what does he say about the dangers of monopoly?

Explore Proudhon's concept of anarchism. How does it relate to his critique of the state, and what does he envision as an alternative to traditional forms of governance?

Examine Proudhon's critique of existing legal and economic systems, including his ideas on usury, inheritance, and the social implications of property rights. How does he believe these systems contribute to inequality and oppression?

Evaluate the lasting influence of Proudhon's ideas on subsequent political and economic thought. In what ways did his arguments about property, labor, and governance influence later thinkers and movements?

Glossary of Key Terms

Anarchism: A political philosophy that advocates for self-governed societies without hierarchical authority or government.

Dialectics: A method of argumentation that involves examining opposing ideas to arrive at a more complete understanding.

Free Association: The principle of individuals voluntarily coming together for mutual benefit without external coercion.

Mutualism: An economic theory based on reciprocity, fair exchange, and mutual aid.

Monopoly: Exclusive control of a market or industry by a single entity, often leading to exploitative practices.

Proprietor: One who has legal ownership or control over a property or resource.

Possessor: One who holds or uses a property or resource, not necessarily with legal ownership.

Jus in re: A right in a thing; the right to claim what is legally one's own.

Jus ad rem: A right to a thing; a claim to eventually acquire legal ownership.

Usury: The lending of money at excessively high rates of interest.

Increase: The unearned increase in value or profit that a proprietor gains simply from owning property.

First Occupancy: The idea that the first person to occupy an unowned resource has a right to that resource.

Logarithms: In Proudhon's context, not a specific mathematical concept, but a figure of speech to describe the way that property's revenue increases according to an exponential system of logic.

Stellionate: The sale or lease of something to which one has no title.

Terminus: The Roman god of boundaries; the worship of the god symbolizes a religious justification for strict property laws.

Action Possessoires: Legal action to protect one's possession of a resource.

Seisin: The possession of property with the intent of maintaining it and controlling it.